Resisting the Suspicious Other:
The Representations of the Orient in Select Arab American Novels

A Synopsis

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By

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The Orient that appears in Orientalism, then, is a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire. […] The Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined. On this stage will appear the figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate.

Edward Said,

Introduction

This study aims at exploring the representations of the concept of the Orient and the search of Eastern identity by Arab-American writers who view this feeling in their works as it is a kind of trouble to them especially after the 9/11 events. The feeling of being another is an idea that Arab Americans think that it should be resisted and countered. Different authors show that as a form of internal conflict through which they represent themselves and their responses to being caught in two different cultures, not knowing whether they belong "here" or "there," and the way the Orient is represented to them makes them in a dilemma as being aliens in the American Society. Their representations are based on the cultural-political atmosphere they are surrounded with in America.

Arab-American literature existed in America for more than a century, yet it started to flourish and capture the attention of critics and literary scholars in the last two decades. This literary burgeoning reflects in part the shifting historical, social, and political contexts that have pushed Arab-Americans to the foreground, creating both new spaces for their voices and new urgencies of expression, as well as the flourishing creativity of these writers.

It was after the 1960s when different ethnics like Jewish American, Indian American writers started to write about their ethnic issues that Arab American writers found it easy to write about their ethnic issues. It was with the migrants coming from the Middle East most particularly from Lebanon. These immigrants, who were from a variety of countries, frequently Muslim, and often better educated and more politically engaged than earlier immigrants had been, stimulated settled Arab-Americans to engage more directly with Arab culture and politics. Meanwhile, political events, from the 1967 war to 9-11 and beyond, forced Arab-Americans to grapple with their identity and with the "write or be written" imperative: Define yourself or others will define you. This has a very important connection to the idea that those Arab American writers aim at defining themselves rather than being defined by the western literature generally or western media particularly that viewed them rather more cruelly and barbaric people. Therefore, there emerged lots of Arab American writers who reflected the Middle East and Arab conflict from their own perspective facing the western representation of

the Middle East and Arabs. This study will tackle these representations through selected works of Arab American Writers.

Objectives of the Study

1- This study aims at investigating the concept of the Orient and its repercussions on the Arab -Americans' crisis of identity.
2- The study will show how the unfair representations of Arab Americans exacerbate in the post-9/11 America.
3- The study will illustrate Arab American writings as a form of counter-discourse against the master discourse of the American media.
4- The study aims at paralleling the two concepts of Orientalism and Counter-discourse which can clarify the title of the thesis and justify the reference of the term resistance.
5- It will also trace the gradual developments of Arab Americans writers and how meticulously they manage to compromise living through two cultures. The prejudiced representations of Arab Americans as the "cultural other" and the "enemy residing from within" will be at the heart of this study. The Orient as represented to be an opposite reflection of the Occident make a conflicting vision in the scenario of representations. Therefore, the study will trigger the way how it is represented.
6- The study will look at and examine some literary works of Arab American Writers who resist the orientalist representations of Arab Americans as potential terrorists. In this respect, the study aims at dismantling the orientalist discourse of hegemony and the racial discriminations embedded in the mind of many Americans after President Bush announced the campaign of "War on Terror in September, 2001. 9/11.
7- This study will highlight these issues and make them more understandable and reachable.

Hypothesis

It can be seen as a description of resisting the suspicious other and the master discourse in the US. Arab American writing is a reflection of the countering face to the American vision towards the 'Orient'. It is a kind of reflection to the resisting form to the picture of Arabs drawn in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. This brings the scene of Arab American writing to be the counter-discourse to the American media which represent the Master discourse in portraying Arabs and Muslims as the suspicious other. The precarious position of Arab Americans is that they keep fluctuating between two different cultures—the old homeland and the newly adopted home in the US. The implications of their otherness worsened in the aftermath of 9/11 as they

became more visible in the minds of many Americans as the suspicious Other. The feeling of being the 'traumatized other' reflects a change in the consciousness of hyphenated Arab Americans. Thus, they attempt to challenge any binary opposition between the society of belonging and the one of living respectively. For Arab Americans to survive the orientalist discourse of otherness, they have to strengthen their interrelationships with other ethnic minorities in the US. The Arab American community nowadays is suffering from the dilemma of racial marginalization and alienation both at the individual and collective levels. The ebb and flow between the Arab and American sides of their identities reveals the difficulties of trying to draw neat identity formation in the borderlands. To sum up, the plight of Arab Americans nowadays is that in their countries of origin, they are seen through the prism of American citizens. On the contrary, they are portrayed as potential terrorists and outsiders in mainstream American culture. This unfair prejudice against them has political, cultural, and even ethnic implications that go beyond any simplistic understandings of their diasporic identities.

Scope of the Study

The thesis will engage discussion of the two terms *Orientalism* and *Counter discourse*. It will deal with both terms in parallel. The term *Orientalism* will have its discussion based on Edward Said's views on the term *Orientalism;* while the term *Counter discourse* will be discussed based on Richard Terdiman's perspective. The study will be under the umbrella of the American Literature. It will use the post-colonialist texts for two Arab American writers and one is British Pakistani writer. The first writer is Laila Halaby (1966) from Jordan, the second writer is Leila Ahmed (1940) from Egypt and the third writer is Mohsin Hamid (1971) from Pakistan. One text has been selected for Laila Halaby; it is " *Once in a Promised Land"*(2007). Also one text has been selected for Leila Ahmed; it is "*A Quest Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, From the Middle East to America"* (2011). One text has been selected for Mohsin Hamid; this text is "*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*" (2007).

Literature Review

The vision of the Orient has been first tackled by Edward Said in his *Orientalism.* He pictures it as "not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe. This is one of the ways that E. Said illustrated the Orient. Arab American writers such as Laila Halaby, Mohsin Hamid, Leila Ahmed represented the Orient in a different way; they tackled the East as a social, political and cultural construct from within; not as it is viewed to the Americans through the Western Media. For

example, Laila Halaby in her work *Once in a Promed Land,* she discusses how Americans look at Muslims and how they suspect them.

On the other hand, counter-discourse is a theory of Richard Terdiman which he used to refer to the resisting discourse against the master discourse. The concept has been examined differently by different scholars. The researcher will use the concept to clarify the reference to the tern resistance which is a part of the study that aims at paralleling the two terms of orientalism and counter-discourse. Some of the following Arab-American writers can also be reviewed to refer to the concepts examined. The Arab American writers who might be examined can be listed as follows:

Abraham Mitrie Rihbany
Afifa Karam
Anthony Shadid
Catherine Filloux
Chawky Frenn
Claire Messud
Daoud Kuttab
Diana Abu-Jaber
Elia Abu Madi
Elmaz Abinader, author, playwright and activist
Etel Adnan
Eugene Paul Nassar
Hakim Almasmari
Hisham Matar
Ibtisam Barakat
Ismail Khalidi
Jack Marshall
Jess Rizkallah
Joseph Awad[1]
Khaled Mattawa
Khalil Gibran
Lawrence Joseph
Lisa Suhair Majaj
Mahmoud Saeed
Mikha'il Na'ima (Mikhail Naimy)
Mohja Kahf
Mona Simpson
Moustafa Bayoumi
Naomi Shihab Nye
Randa Jarrar
Rashid Khalidi
Ray Hanania
Saladin Ahmed, science fiction and fantasy author, poet

Salom Rizk
Sam Hamod
Samuel John Hazo
Saree Makdisi
Sharif Elmusa, poet and editor [1][2][3]
Steven Salaita
Suheir Hammad
Susan Abulhawa, fiction and nonfiction writer, author of Mornings in Jenin (Bloomsbury 2010)
Susan Muaddi Darraj
Therese Soukar Chehade
Vance Bourjaily
William Peter Blatty

Research Methodology

This study will employ a kind of descriptive and analytical study to the selected works of the Arab American writers. It will trace the thematic references of the concept of the Orient and the search of identity. Moreover, it will trace the historical immigrations of Arabs to America and reflect the different problems they confronted by coming to America. It will follow a kind of descriptive and analytical approach to the select works. The analysis of the works will be based on Edward Said's views in his *Orientalism.*

Chapterization

This study falls into five chapters. The first chapter will be a general introduction to the concept of *Orientalism* and the immigration of Arab Americans to the U.S. The second chapter provides the literature review of the study. The third chapter will deal with the novels of **Laila Halaby**. It will describe and analyze how the orient is represented in her novels and how Americans respond to the concept. The fourth chapter deals with selected works of **Leila Ahmed** that tackle the same idea of the research. The fifth chapter concludes the study and provides the findings of the research hypothesis as reflected in the works discussed in the research.

Arafat Ameen Saif Abdu — Research Scholar
Dr. D. R. Mane — Research Guide

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